

THE

MAW
Pa 1794.1

H A P P I N E S S

OF THE

INTERMEDIATE STATE:

A SERMON.

BY

THE REV. WILLIAM ARMSTRONG.

BERWICK:

PRINTED BY W. PHORSON.

1794

6

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

1215 N. 4TH ST. PHILA. PA.

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

1215 N. 4TH ST. PHILA. PA.

The Happiness of the intermediate State.

LUKE xxiii. verse 43.

Verily I say unto thee, to-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.

AMONG other aggravations of our Saviour's sufferings, it was his lot to be crucified in the company of two notorious malefactors, one of whom was so hardened an infidel, that he blasphemously railed on him, saying, *If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.* The other malefactor, with pious concern, rebukes his companion in these words, *Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man hath done nothing amiss:* And then turning to Jesus, he saith, *Lord, remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom!* To which humble petition so expressive of a sincere and lively faith, our Saviour returns the gracious answer in the text, *Verily, I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.*

These words duly considered, contain a fund of comfort for the good Christian, under the worst sufferings of the present state. For they assure him, that the soul dies not with the body, but is immortal; that death doth not deprive the believer even of a day's existence;—nay more, at the same time that it delivers him from the miseries of this life, it opens to him the gates of Paradise, and consigns him to a state of unutterable happiness. *This day,* says Christ to the penitent thief, *shalt thou be with me in Paradise;* not after thy resurrection, but immediately after thy dissolution.

How absurd then is it to suppose, as some have done, that the soul lies dormant till the general resurrection, or, which is the same, that it dies with the body! The contrary is plainly asserted in the text, and not in the text

only, but in many other passages of the New Testament, some of which I shall beg leave to point out to you.

1. The first that I shall take notice of, is 2 Cor. v. where the Apostle says, *We know assuredly, that if our earthly house of this tabernacle, (or the body which we now inhabit,) were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with mortal hands, eternal in the heavens. And therefore, as he farther adds, we are confident, or courageous under all the evils that befall us, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.* The Apostle here speaks of death, as introducing good Christians to a fuller enjoyment of Christ, and of course to greater happiness than ever they knew while confined to the body. But how could this be, if the soul be supposed to die with the body?

2. Again (Philip. i.) the same Apostle writes thus: *To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour. Yet what I shall choose I know not, for I am in a strait between two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better; nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. As if he had said, If I desire life it is only to spend it in the service of Christ, and if I desire death, it is because I know it is my greatest gain. However if it be the will of God to continue me in the present state, I submit to it, and shall think my labours well repayed, if I am made the instrument of awakening and reforming sinners by the preaching of the gospel. And yet if it were left to my own choice, I would not know (as I am situated) whether death or life were to be preferred. To die and to be with Christ, were I to consider my own advantage only, is without all doubt infinitely better than to live here: but with regard to your profit and edification my presence is highly necessary.* Now if the soul is to continue in a state of insensibility till the general resurrection, could the Apostle think such a state better than a life tending, as his did, to the salvation of sinners? Or could he possibly call such a state a being with Christ? No certainly: for if upon his dissolution, his soul were to lie dead, he needed to have been in no strait at all about the matter; since a life spent in converting souls, and promoting the eternal happiness of his fellow creatures, would, with all its sufferings, be far more eligible, than a state of insensibility.

3. I shall mention just another passage to corroborate the doctrine in the text, and that is Matt. x. 28. where our Saviour says, *Fear not them, who can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.* These words seem to contain a plain proof that the soul dies not with the body. For you may observe, that what it is allowed that man can do to the body, it is denied that he can do to the soul. From hence it appears, that Christ in these words, speaks not of death eternal; (for *that* men cannot inflict upon the body, nor yet hinder its resurrection;) but of a temporal death. You will likewise observe, that they who by killing the body, make the soul also to perish till the re-union of both at the last day, do also kill the soul, and so do more than they, who can kill the body only; and they who by killing the body, do also render the soul or spirit of a man insensate, do also kill the soul; for it is not easy to see how an intelligent, thinking, and perceiving being, can be more killed than by depriving it of all sensation, thought and perception. Since therefore (St. Luke xii. 4.) Christ saith that the adversaries of Christians can only kill their bodies, and *here* that they cannot kill their souls, we must conclude, that the soul doth not perish with the body, nor lose its powers of perception at death; but that every one, at the instant of his dissolution, accordingly as he hath lived in this world, is consigned to the punishments he hath deserved in the infernal prison, or admitted to the ravishing delights of Paradise.

The doctrine then of the soul's existence between death and judgment being thus established, let us next consider that state of happiness, to which the righteous are advanced at death. It is here called Paradise, which signifies a garden of pleasure, in allusion to that happy place in which our first parents dwelt. By considering the nature of the *earthly*, we shall be enabled to form some idea of the *heavenly* Paradise. Now the Scripture informs us, that our first parents were blessed with perfect happiness in the terrestrial Paradise. Their Creator frequently vouchsafed to converse with them, sometimes by the mouth of his angels, and sometimes by a voice from heaven. The earth of its own accord produced every thing necessary for food, or pleasure. No unruly passions dis-

composed their minds—no sense of guilt disturbed their inward peace—no dread of death embittered life, nor any of those numberless diseases and calamities with which the sons of men are now visited, had then power to reach them. Earth was the picture of heaven. Sheltered under the wings of almighty love, they dwelt secure from every evil. Thus blest, they had nothing to wish for, and nothing to do, but to thank and adore the hand, that had so liberally loaded them with his bounty. Here was happiness indeed! And what prevented it from being ours? Why sin, the fruitful cause of all our misery. Our first parents transgressed the divine command, and by so doing forfeited this happy state, both to themselves and their posterity. We have no great cause however to repine, if we consider, that God of his goodness hath provided for us something still better, if we will but take the road which he prescribes, to arrive at it. By the resurrection of Christ from the dead, we are begotten again to a lively hope of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and eternal in the heavens. And shortly shall every faithful soul be put in possession of happiness infinitely surpassing any thing our first parents knew on earth. Picture to yourself one of the most delightful spots on earth, where all the beauties of nature conspire to render it a scene of pleasure; where the verdant meadows are copiously watered with cooling streams; where the fertile ground produces spontaneously all the necessaries and conveniences of life; where the trees, ever blooming, bend beneath a load of delicious fruit, and where a perpetual spring exhilarates the mind. Imagine yourself placed in this happy spot, with all your dearest and nearest friends about you, and at the same time secure from every thing that might alarm or injure you: exempted from every uneasy reflection, from every painful disease, and even from death itself, and that you had nothing to do, but to enjoy the blessings before you, and to adore the hand that bestowed them. Delightful and desirable as this situation may appear, as being more than a picture of the earthly Paradise, it yet falls far short of that happiness, to which death transmits the righteous. And for this reason, we can very easily form an idea of all that has just now been said, but it never once entered into the heart of man to conceive

the glory, which God has prepared in a future state for them that love him. It is true there are difficulties in our way to it. Before we rest *there*, we must labour *here*, and at last pass to it through the gates of death. But what then? The glory of that happy state will make us more than ample amends for all we can endure in our way to it.

In the terrestrial Paradise, our first parents were blest with frequent visits from their Creator. In the celestial Paradise, the righteous enjoy the perpetual sun-shine of the divine presence, and repose themselves for ever on the bosom of their God. That Saviour whom they sought and served here, there manifests himself to them in all his native beauty, majesty, and love. Removed from every degree of sin and sorrow, and improved in knowledge, purity, and love, they hold sweet converse with their exalted Lord, with angels, and saints made perfect in glory, and live amidst the overflowing joys of spiritual and eternal pleasures. In the present state, the righteous, even for their very righteousness, are often derided and persecuted by wicked and ungodly men. But Paradise shall perfectly deliver them from all such cruel insults. For no sensualist or profane person shall ever gain admittance there. No liar, drunkard, or malicious soul, shall approach to interrupt the good man's happiness, or to pollute the mansions of the blessed with their accursed presence. No: all such offenders, without a change of heart and life at least, are by the word of God, expressly debarred from the kingdom of heaven.

As an additional happiness in this paradisaical state, we shall there meet, know, and converse with all our friends, who before us have departed this life in the faith and fear of God. And what should greatly reconcile us to death, instead of those earthly friends we leave behind, we shall there find those, in whose breasts reigns the purest, the most exalted and unchangeable friendship; and who are indissolubly united to us by that spirit of love, which is shed abroad in the hearts of all that believe. Here shall the fond parent find again the much lamented child of his love, snatched from his embrace by the cold hand of death. And here shall the child, instituted in the paths of virtue, find the parent who trained him to glory,

by his wholesome and godly instructions. Here shall the affectionate husband meet again the partner of his earthly joys, never more to be separated from her. In short, here shall all, who have made it their care to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present life, mingle with each other in the sweetest harmony and love, and plentifully partake of these divine delights, which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart been able to conceive.

Such is that state to which death introduces the faithful servants of God. And who is there that does not earnestly desire to be thus happy with *Christ*? and who would not willingly exchange the pleasures of earth for such complete felicity? Something more than wishes however is necessary if we would indeed attain this happiness. Every known sin must be renounced. The word of God must be a law to us. Whatever is there enjoined, we must carefully perform, and whatever is there forbidden, we must as carefully avoid. By reading, meditation, abstinence, and prayer, we must mortify our members that are on earth, raise our affections to heaven, and fit ourselves for those spiritual pleasures, which are at God's right hand for ever. By a holy and irreproachable life, we must shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, and study to adorn the doctrine of our God and Saviour in all things. Love to God, and love to man, must be the ruling principle in our heart, manifesting itself, not only in works of piety, but in works of mercy also. Accordingly, we must make it our business, (so far as we have opportunity and ability) to instruct the ignorant, to reform the vicious, to relieve the needy, to overcome evil with good, and, in short, to do every thing that in us lies, to promote the temporal and eternal well-being of those about us. This is the road we must take, if we would secure to ourselves an entrance into the celestial Paradise at our dissolution.

I shall now conclude with a few words to my different hearers; by way of application to the whole.

1. And, first, to you who make the law of God your study and delight; who devoutly observe the divine ordinances, and *by patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory, honour, and immortality*: to you this doctrine contains the

richest cordial to support you in your weary pilgrimage, and the most engaging motive to make you *steadfast, unmoveable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord*, seeing you are so shortly to reap the fruits of your labour. Do wicked and ungodly men causelessly hate and persecute you? Does poverty, pain, or sickness add to your afflictions? Do you mourn under the loss of earthly comforts? Remember that the captain of your salvation, with all his unspeckled innocence, was no stranger to still heavier sufferings of the same sort; and remember likewise, that you have but a little longer to hold out, and then Paradise, that land of pure delight, will open to receive you, where, when you once arrive, *the wicked shall for ever cease to trouble; every tear shall be wiped from your eyes*, and all your desires more than abundantly satisfied.

2. I would address myself to those, who, though they take some care about their eternal concerns, are yet negligent in many particulars. Such are they who are, as the scripture expresses it, neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm: and who, though convinced of the necessity of securing the one thing needful, do yet suffer the business and pleasures of the world to engross so much of their time and thoughts, that little, very little, room is left for more momentous concerns. This, I fear, is the case of far the greater part of Christians. And what shall I say to such? Why, I must tell you, you are living in a state, more dangerous in many respects, than that of open profaneness; and a state that is very apt to end in infidelity, and a total departure from the living God; for from being indifferent about religion, a man soon comes to have no religion at all. I must farther tell you, that this state will effectually deprive you of that comfort in your last moments, which the doctrine we have been considering, would otherwise inspire. And instead of the pleasing hope of a blissful Paradise to support your trembling soul, fearful doubts and forebodings will terrify and torment you, and render your situation truly deplorable. For generally no person is so uneasy upon a death-bed as the *almost Christian*.

3. I would bespeak the attention of you who wilfully, and habitually violate the laws of God; who cast off every thing of the Christian, but the name; and in spite

of all the threats and promises of God, and every method used to reclaim you, obstinately persist in those courses, which your own consciences tell you must lead to certain destruction. Why will ye be so cruel to your own souls, as to make the sufferings of life, and the pains of death still more insupportable, by depriving yourselves of that which only can administer consolation in such circumstances, the pleasing prospect of immediate glory in an after-state? Besides this, a wicked life does not only exclude you from tasting the joys of Paradise, but over and above sinks you in eternal perdition. For if the angels of God do not convey your departing spirits to the realms of light, the devil and his angels will hurry them away to the regions of eternal darkness and despair. And oh! think (unless a change of heart take place) how soon this may be! Not at the general judgment, supposing *that* at a distance, but at the moment of your death. And how glad soever you may be to fancy that at a distance, yet who is he that can assure himself of one moment beyond the present? Think then what it must be to go out of the world sentenced by God and your own conscience to irreversible woe! If the sins of the best men were set in full view before them, the sight (if they had no hope in a Redeemer) would most probably distract them. What then must be the condition of persevering infidels, when death draws the curtain, and sets their accumulated crimes in all their native deformity, before their affrighted consciences! The sight surely were hell enough, if there were no other.

Look back then, ye profane and impure, ye worldlings and sensualists, ye haters of your own happiness, and despisers of heaven's choicest blessings: look back, I say, on your numberless and aggravated sins: consider what woe they are leading you to; and what blessedness they will rob you of, that you may for ever detest and forsake them. Look up at the same time, by the eye of faith, to that substantial happiness, to which the Redeemer so earnestly invites you, and humbly accept the proffered kindness, before the door of mercy be shut against you, and before your God and best friend, wearied out by your incorrigible contempt of his favours, give you up in wrath to your hearts desire, and leave you to perish in

your sins. Think what a dreadful thing it is to be given up a prey to the malignant spirits of hell ; and abandoned by God for ever, to the horrors of black despair and fruitless remorse ! Think what it will be to be torn from a world that has engrossed your whole affections, and forced to appear in the presence of a long forgotten God ! Think what anguish of heart you must feel, to see a pious parent, child, or other near relation, reaping the rewards of their past labours in Paradise, and yourself thrust down to hell, for ever deprived of those golden opportunities, which you now set so light a value upon ! Meditate seriously and frequently upon these things, and, by the grace of God, you will soon be convinced of the folly and wickedness of pursuing those sinful pleasures, which God so strictly forbids, and for which you must shortly pay so high a price.

Upon the whole, may the belief of what has been said concerning the soul's existence, in a state of bliss or woe, between death and judgment, be deeply impressed on all our minds. May this belief produce a correspondent practice, and incline us to live in every particular as the gospel directs. And then, when death removes us from the present scene of suffering, we shall rise to bliss unspeakable, and be for ever with the Lord.

HYMN.

1. He is a God of sov'reign love, that promis'd heav'n to me,
And taught my thoughts to soar above, where happy spirits be.
2. Prepare me, Lord, for thy right hand, then come the joyful day ;
Come death, and some celestial band, to bear my soul away.
3. Haste, my beloved, fetch my soul up to thy blest abode ;
Fly, for my spirit longs to see my Saviour and my God.

ANOTHER HYMN.

1. Why flow these torrents of distress? (the gentle Saviour cries,)

Why are my sleeping saints survey'd with unbelieving eyes?
2. Death's feeble arm shall never boast, a friend of Christ is slain ;

Nor o'er a meaner part in dust, a lasting pow'r retain
3. Touch'd by my hand, in smiles they rise, they rise to sleep no

more ;

But rob'd with light, and crown'd with joys, to endless day
they soar.
4. Jesus, our faith receives thy word, and tho' fond nature weep,
Grace learns to hail the pious dead, and emulate their sleep.